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# Jason Cons. *Sensitive Space: Fragmented Territory at the India- Bangladesh Border*

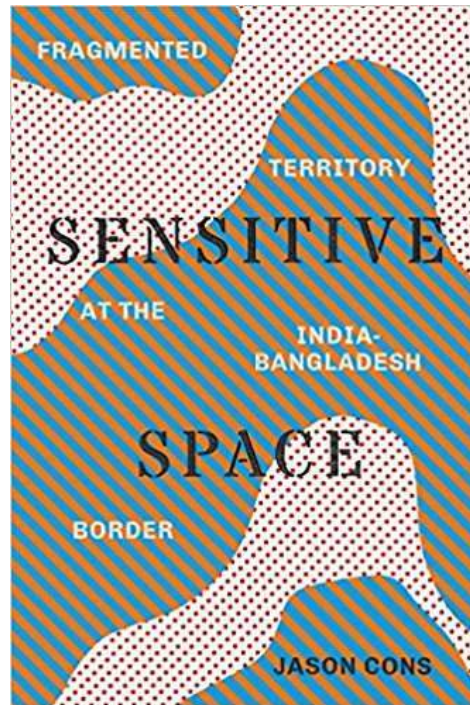
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Cons, Jason. 2016. *Sensitive Space: Fragmented Territory at the India-Bangladesh Border*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 224 pages.

- 1 The long border of the former British Empire in India is fraught with conflictive issues. While Kashmir regularly attracts the world's scrutiny on the border between India and Pakistan (erstwhile West Pakistan), the India-Bangladesh border (formerly East Pakistan) appears in contrast as free from any open conflict. Yet over the years it increasingly proved a problematic issue (Berthet 2016). The border hastily delineated by the Radcliff line in the months of June and July 1947 singled out 166 enclaves between India and East Pakistan. They grew out of the loosely controlled Mughal eastern border in Cooch Behar. The 1713 treaty between both polities resulted in a hybrid set up, with authority vested in both the local landlords and the soldiers serving the imperial power of Delhi. In 1773, by acknowledging British sovereignty, the maharaja of Cooch Behar obtained the recognition of his princely state as distinct from the surrounding Province of Bengal under direct British rule. Hence the future enclaves were under a different administrative regime but within a same polity. In drawing the border between India and East Pakistan, Cyril Radcliff followed the outline of these micro administrative divisions. But one distinction was added: those of Hindu majority fell under the former and those of Muslim majority under the latter. Henceforth the puzzle-like territories became part of countries distinct from the territory surrounding them. For their inhabitants, the idea of border and nation-state took on an altogether different signification.
- 2 The 70<sup>th</sup>-year anniversary of the Partition triggered academic and non-academic endeavors to collect memories of the last surviving witnesses, but scholarship on the subject remains scarce. Malini Sur's works recently focused on the little studied Bangladesh-India border (Sur 2014), one of the longest terrestrial borders between two nations. But apart from Willem van Schendel and Reece Jones' studies, the enclaves between the two countries have attracted little academic attention (Jones 2002). Till their exchange in 2015, they represented more than half of all the enclaves in the world. Jason Cons' long-standing research was inspired by "Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves," the seminal study by van Schendel (2012) on the relationship between the state and citizens resulting from these territorial discontinuities.
- 3 Located on today's border between Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal each enclave has a peculiar configuration all its own. According to Jason Cons the notion of sensitive space is the paradigm that provides an analytic approach common to all. He selected the Bangladesh territory of Dahagram, the largest enclave between the two countries. With an approximate population of seventeen thousand in 2014, it drew public attention due to the *Tin Bigha corridor*, a 170-meter-long land corridor between the enclave and mainland Bangladesh, controlled by Indian border security forces. Visiting Dahagram over several years, Jason Cons studied how life in the enclave became entangled in the praxis of



sensitive territoriality. His main argument is that “the enclaves, and Dahagram in particular, trouble Indian and Bangladeshi nationalist imaginations of contiguous territory, of the border as neatly dividing inside from outside, and of identity and belonging” (Cons 2016:7).

- 4 The author locates his argument with the critique of the nation-state such as that of Partha Chatterjee, and Carl Schmitt. Referring to the latter Jason Cons writes that “They are spaces that ... the center thinks with intense passion, though not necessarily with great care.” (p. 21). The author studies the enclaves as a vantage point which allows the unveiling of the uncanny arrangements of the state concealed by its linear narrative, and its cartographic representations. He poses the enclaves as itchy spots in the geo-body of the nation that call for a counter narrative. Following Partha Chatterjee, his study “seeks to interrogate totalizing explanations of territory, nation, and state by attending to the impossibility of separating nationalist projects from fragmentary and troubling space. It engages the projects of making national territory in zones where these projects are called into crisis” (p. 23).
- 5 The book is divided into three parts. The first one, “Entering Sensitive Space,” addresses the theoretical framework reversing the title of Partha Chatterjee’s famous essay into “the Fragments and Their Nation(s).” He then addresses the issue of territorial anxieties, as well as borders, and enclaves as challenging territory. “Sensitive Histories,” the second part, looks at the transformation of “border problems into sensitive spaces,” through the history of the making the enclaves, and the ensuing negotiations around them. According to Cons, this process led the enclaves to become “amplified territory.” He delves into the histories of belonging and the difficult negotiations of a political community in Dahagram. He addresses the way the residents of the enclaves weave their narratives into the broader narrative of power in order to support their claim to belonging to the nation. Here, his study also looks at the dynamics of territorial and social rivalry within the enclave and the Muslim population. The last part, “Life and Rule in a Sensitive Place” addresses the making of the border in its physicality, the assertion of the state’s presence through virtual development as well as agrarian changes. These two last points reflect broader regional dynamics rather than development specific to the enclave. Yet, it allows the reader to follow the latest change during the current decade and in the aftermath of the 2015 agreement between Bangladesh and India.
- 6 The book aims at conceptualizing and studying the articulations between emotion, and the state. Sensitivity translates into territoriality and identity-making. The negotiations have located the enclaves at the heart of the nation’s geo-body, paving the way for mobilization at the national, regional and local levels, along with their respective electioneering mileage. Having begun with a practical issue requiring local adjustments, the residents of the enclaves gradually became entangled in multi-scale negotiations over which they had little leverage.
- 7 How did the border problems transform the enclave into sensitive spaces and into *amplified territory* (chapter two)? Having underestimated the emotional dimensions and the multi-scale sensitivity of the enclaves issue, Jawaharlal Nehru soon had to backtrack after his first attempt to put an end to those “odd bits” as he called them in 1958 (p. 56). The same year, immediately after he signed an agreement with his Pakistani counterpart Feroz Khan Noon, Nehru was confronted with opposing mobilization as well as unforeseen loopholes in the border that involved further negotiations. Nehru had to tone down his rational approach and acknowledge a “certain human aspect” to the issue

(p. 57). After this first aborted negotiation, a long story of attempts followed with new rounds of mobilization further increasing the sensitivity of the issue.

- 8 The actual issues faced by inhabitants of the enclaves such as the denial of mobility and the resulting inaccessibility to basic services were superseded by emotive considerations at different scales. Two local organizations were formed in West Bengal to protest against the opening of the Tin Bigha corridor. The project threatened to turn the village of Kuchlibari in West Bengal into a new enclave between on the one side the Teesta River and on the other one Bangladesh, the only access to India being the small strip of land proposed as the future Tin Bigha corridor. Local mobilization was backed at the regional and national levels, the negotiating governments being accused by opposition parties of displaying a lack of patriotism.
- 9 This resulted in the successive agreements and their ultimate standstill, the Dahagram “war” in 1965—when residents fled the Indian army’s raid in the enclave—against the backdrop of the India-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir, and official visits, notably by the general Ershad, president of Bangladesh, in 1986 and 1988 (p. 84–86). Temporary schemes, and other short lived state’s interventions added to the symbolic dimension of the enclave in the narrative of the nation’s conflict against its neighbor. After almost two decades of negotiations, the Tin Bigha Corridor finally opened in 1992, but with various time restrictions till 2011. The history of the enclaves reflects the relations between the two countries rather than the local situation.
- 10 In the years preceding the agreement, Jason Cons observed the challenging task of tracing the limits of the border on the ground: “Many of the pillars for these demarcations had never been placed, several had fallen into disrepair and to be remade. The quotidian process of marking territory was slow and laborious” (p. 112). He witnessed the work of the Joint Border Survey Team in Dahagram in 2007. Their task was to implement and recheck a series of proposed demarcations from the 1991–92 survey and a 2005 supplementary survey (p. 111–12). The reference to the trigonometric measurement harkens back to the Great Trigonometric Survey of India, a major venture carried out successively under the East India Company and the British Raj to map its Indian possessions. The results of this long-standing effort to measure and delineate the empire were instrumental in drawing future maps and borders in South Asia, but as the pillar-making scene quoted above and the history of the enclave show, it did not prove as definite as it claimed to be. Sixty years after the Radcliff line was drawn—delineating India and Pakistan—the enclave’s border still seems to be in the making, contradicting once more the linear narrative of the nation. It is only on May 11, 2015 that the Indian Parliament ratified the 119<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Constitution for a mutual exchange of the 111 Indian enclaves in the Bangladesh territory and the 51 Bangladeshi ones in India.
- 11 The study of Dahagram provides a telling case about the grey areas that develop on the basis of a notion such as sensitivity, one that is not part of the Constitution but becomes an integral and effective part of the state’s praxis. Mishaps around the enclaves continuously updated the trauma and representation of a threatening neighbor through the gruesome killing of people attempting to cross the border.
- 12 Left with little other choice than to become impersonators of a daily re-enactment of the Partition as part of the country’s emotional foundation, residents of Dahagram wove their personal stories into the larger picture of the nation. This virtual centrality offered a potential counterweight to their actual extreme marginalization. The nation across a border delineated to set apart a threatening Other, their extreme proximity and

vulnerability to the neighboring country allowed them to claim the status of freedom fighter, a particularly significant one in the political ethos of Bangladesh. Hence, the paradoxical character of their situation became even more acute. They were part of a narrative locating them at the very heart of the nation amidst daily reminders of an extreme marginality. The daily life of the residents remained indeed sandwiched between the loopholes of the state's machinery, while the most basic service remained out of reach, and its power of coercion in its most extreme forms only too palpable, through the omnipresence of the border and the burden of constant checking.

- 13 The territorial corrosion of a national geo-body and its linear frontiers results from this very border regime. The challenges to the homogeneity of the national geo-body provides a justification for furthering even tighter control and restriction on mobility. Mobilization around the issue only further influenced state intervention to increase the materiality of an unstable border, and the surveillance, resulting in further deprivation of mobility for the residents. In the meanwhile, smuggling activities went unabated, becoming a central economic feature.
- 14 Unruliness became another overarching representation of the enclaves in the mind of the general public, perception of their inhabitants swinging from martyrs or unsung heroes to born outlaws. This paradoxical representation was noted in the Indian and Bangladeshi press, and in the political discourse. What actually prevailed was a very precarious application of the law in cases where women were the victims of sexual violence and kidnapping. Women were indeed the *prime* victims of the denied mobility imposed on residents of the enclaves turned subaltern by their very geographical locations. In the mutual rivalry across the border, abducting women became part of some heroic narratives of resistance in the enclave, just as smuggling or retaliating. The construct between the inner, domestic, and female sphere on the one hand and the outer, public, and male sphere on the other hand takes an ever more radical dimension in the enclave. To this gender bias adds the one vested in a nationalism that projects women as the symbol of the nation. Hence, as in some occurrences of war, violence against women of the other nation was vested with a patriotic dimension.
- 15 From a possible terrain whence could have emerged imaginative alternatives to the clear cut partitioning border, the enclaves became on the contrary the privileged site for a constant reenactment of that trauma and the epitome of the entanglement and disempowerment of citizens by a nation-state's administration. Recent initiatives such as encouraging *haat*—weekly market—on the Bangladesh border with the Indian state of Tripura may be an indicator of a possible change. Will sensitivity one day recede, allowing for an in-depth paradigm shift and a different imagination of the border? It seems unlikely.
- 16 Jason Cons' study brings out the particularly rich history of enclaves in South Asia. The EIC and the Raj used the shaping and reshaping of internal and external borders, and restricted circulation. This legacy of territorial engineering was carried forward in independent India by the central government. Some autonomist groups, notably those protesting in North-East India, based their demands on such circulation regimes as the *Inner Line Permit*, which restricts access to their state. This restrictive regime also applies to the reserved areas, tribal-dominated areas often with dense forest cover. There the association of territoriality and ethnicity as part of the politics of resources, as well as the state's direct administrative intervention sustain the dynamics of enclave-making.

- 17 The case of Dahagram also echoes the history of the Portuguese and French enclaves: a territory in which the mainland invested very little, but triggering intense emotion. Totally neglected by the colonial administration, French settlements in India in 1947 showed extremely poor records in education, health, and gradually in trade as well, as a result of this very neglect. Showcased as a “den of criminals” by the British press due to the presence of *swadeshi* militants, these settlements played a different part in the history of colonialism and state-making. Chandernagor, a French settlement in present-day West Bengal, became a bone of contention in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at the heart of Anglo-French relations (Misra-Besnard 1988). Just like the Indo-Bangladesh enclaves, many projects of exchanges were drafted from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards in the name of rationalizing territorial borders and administration but all were defeated by a supposedly heartfelt attachment to the past expressed by the representatives of the nation. After 1947, they triggered passionate debates in both the French and the Indian Parliament becoming an extremely sensitive issue while the situation on the ground was fast deteriorating (Weber 1996). It inspired fascinating novels under the pen of Malayalam author M. Mukundam who explored the lasting effect of fragmentation on the locality, households, and inner identities in the small French enclave of Mahé in present-day Kerala (Mukundam 1999).
- 18 In his preliminary theoretical and analytical approach, Jason Cons writes about sensitive space as “strategic vantage points for understanding not just the constitution of the state or territorial idea but also its breakdown” (Cons 2016:20) that “emerge as illegible zones where the disjuncture between official imaginations and daily life produce further confusions and ambiguities for those who govern them and those who live in them” (p. 21). In his conclusion, he comes back to his initial argument, to show “how local framings and experiences of struggle over fragmentary identities and concepts are more than merely incidental to the postcolonial histories of India and Bangladesh” (p. 23). Hence he chooses to call for further comparison with sensitive spaces today other than enclaves such as urban “slums, refugee camps, post-conflict zones, climate sensitive critical zones, and upland and marginal spaces” (p. 154). He advocates not only a margin-center approach but also a margin to margin one.
- 19 One may argue that national and international action to cordon off such sensitive areas are attempts to restrict them to places, while they are nodes in flux inherent to the functioning of a transnational space, existing beyond places, beyond borders, and sustaining the contemporary global economy. The multiplying loopholes in the states’ imagined unity and self-contained limits increasingly call for a different paradigm of territoriality, places, spaces, and borders. Hence the relevance of border studies illustrated by this decisive contribution by Jason Cons on one of the largest and most peculiar borders of the contemporary world.

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